United Nations

Press Release

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THURSDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Environmental consequences of Gulf conflict discussed at United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) inter-agency consultation in Geneva; Head of UNEP characterizes oil spill in area as largest in history.

- International Committee of Red Cross to send second convoy to Iraq carrying emergency medical supplies.

- Sea-level rise and desertification threats among issues discussed by Committee negotiating climate change framework convention.

- United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control contributes $420,000 to finance technical assistance project for Hungarian drug control units.

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Representatives of some one dozen United Nations agencies and other bodies have expressed extreme concern about the immediate and long-term environmental threats caused by the continuing Persian Gulf hostilities in an ecologically fragile region that supports some 10 million people.

Environmental consequences of the conflict were discussed at a first two-day inter-agency meeting convened by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Geneva. At the meeting, which ended yesterday, the participants concluded that the damage could have serious consequences for a long time to come and could jeopardize appropriate development in the region.

The UNEP and the other agencies represented at the consultation felt there was a need for more detailed information to accurately assess all the possible environmental consequences. Meanwhile, they were actively providing assistance as requested, to the extent possible.

The situation is currently being monitored by the Global Resources Information Database of UNEP (Geneva) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and a UNEP/IMO task force is presently in the region conducting an extensive preliminary assessment. The participants stressed the grave immediate and potential long-term implications of this disaster.

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At a press briefing at Headquarters yesterday, the Executive Director of UNEP, Mostapha K. Tolba, characterized the oil spill as the largest in history, with some 60 million gallons of oil affecting an area of about 350 square miles, or over 900 square kilometres just off Kuwait's shores.

Mr. Tolba said UNEP had prepared a three-point plan of action in an effort to start the clean-up of the oil pollution. The plan consisted of a request for information as to the precise size and nature of the disaster, the emergency meeting in Geneva, and an on-site study currently being prepared by three senior UNEP officials.

The UNEP Executive Director told correspondents that the agency sought to achieve an objective and independent assessment by the United Nations of what exactly was the magnitude of the spill and what actions were needed.

In addition to the major oil spill, Mr. Tolba said another -- about half a mile in size -- had resulted from fighting over a town taken by Iraqi forces and later regained by the allies. He added that UNEP had received information alluding to a possible third oil spill in an Iraqi port, but as yet there were no firm details.

The UNEP Executive Director said he had also told his agency to follow any potential environmental danger that could come from other sources, such as the release into the atmosphere of chemicals or gases stemming from biological weapons which could live in the atmosphere for 40 to 50 years. The UNEP had also requested that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stay alert for signals of extra radiation, he said.

Asked by correspondents how long the clean-up might take, Mr. Tolba replied that it depended on the degree to which hostilities prevented action from being started. As for the cost involved, support in terms of finances and equipment forthcoming from the United States, Canada, Japan, Brazil and Saudi Arabia, and from companies such as Aramco, was sufficient to deal with the situation without any additional cost.

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will dispatch to Iraq on Saturday, 9 February, a second convoy carrying emergency medical supplies and equipment to improve conditions of sanitation.

The first such convoy, carrying 19 tonnes of medical supplies, was sent to Baghdad on 31 January.

The Red Cross reported today that part of this second consignment had been donated by the Iranian Red Crescent, which would also provide the International Committee with logistic support as far as the Iran/Iraq border.

Other convoys with medicines and food were due to follow next week to build up stocks of emergency supplies in Baghdad for the most vulnerable groups among the civilian population in Iraq and Kuwait, the Committee said.

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The Red Cross reported that its delegation in Baghdad, now comprising eight people, will be joined by the delegates accompanying the convoys and will thus be in a better position to meet all its humanitarian obligations.

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The threat to low-lying and small islands States from global warming and sea-level rise, as well as the desertification of many of Africa's least developed countries, were among the issues raised yesterday by the Committee currently negotiating a framework convention on climate change in Washington, D.C.

Among the speakers, Finau A. Mara (Fiji) associated his delegation with the statement made on behalf of small island States. He said the industrialized countries must make deep, significant and immediate cuts in their emissions of greenhouse gases. Countries responsible for the emissions must bear the burden of preventive action and assist non-contributors in making the necessary adjustments through appropriate technical and financial assistance measures. His country, for its part, had been carrying out extensive reafforestation for nearly 20 years, and more than 100,000 acres of plantation forests had been established.

The Pacific subregion, he said, had been subjected to some of the worst forms of exploitation over the past century and a half. Nuclear testing, the incineration of chemical stockpiles, the dumping of toxic and other wastes and driftnet fishing persisted in the region. He believed that all the ingredients necessary for arriving at a framework convention on climate change were present, as was the political will to make it a reality. The very survival and existence of the island countries was at stake.

Speaking for Italy, Giorgio Reitano pledged his country's contribution to the trust fund set up to help developing countries participate in the negotiating process. He announced that Italy would host an international symposium in Milan next July on the prospects of environmentally sound energy.

In addition, he said the Ministers for Environment of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), at their meeting in Paris last week, had pledged "to co-operate with developing countries to enable them to take the necessary measures to address climate change".

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The United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC) will contribute $420,000 for a technical assistance project to help law enforcement agencies in Hungary entrusted with the task of controlling drug abuse and illicit trafficking.

The agreement covering the project was signed in Vienna today by Giuseppe de Gennaro, Executive Director of the Drug Fund , and Vilmos Cserveny, Permanent Representative of Hungary to the United Nations Office at Vienna.

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The Fund's assistance to Hungary is aimed at developing a more effective fight against illicit drug trafficking, especially heroin, which is transported through the Balkans. It is thus part of a wider strategy of the Fund which is expected to involve all the major transit countries linked to the Balkan route. A key element of the strategy is creating an effective infrastructure for co-ordination among these countries in the fight against illicit drug trafficking.

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